

Adolescent Suicidal Behaviors and Sexual Assault

Findings from 1997 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS)

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Objective

- To examine the relationship between having been sexually assaulted and suicidality
- To present the need to integrate suicide prevention in assessing the emotional sequelae of sexual assault
- To present the need to integrate understanding of sexual assault issues and resources in suicide prevention work

Note: Research methods do not permit establishing causality

MYRBS

The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is conducted every two years by the Massachusetts Department of Education with funding from the Centers for Disease Control. The YRBS monitors behaviors related to the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among youth and adults. The survey is administered to 9th-12th grade students in randomly selected public high schools in Massachusetts. In 1997, a total of 3,982 students in 58 public high schools completed the Massachusetts YRBS.

Study Questions

For data analyses and presentation the following questions of the survey were used:

1. During your life, has anyone ever had sexual contact with you against your will?
2. During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?
3. During the last 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide?
4. If you attempted suicide during the last 12 months, did any attempt result in an injury, poisoning, or overdose that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse?

Demographic Characteristic of Total Sample and those Reporting Sexual Assault

Gender	Total Sample	YES Sexual Assault
Female	1945	334 (17.2%)
Male	1960	125 (6.4%)
Total	3905	459 (11.8%)

Demographic Characteristic of Total Sample and those Reporting Sexual Assault

Race/Ethnicity	Total Sample	YES Sexual Assault
White	2931	335 (11.4%)
Hispanic/Latino	299	38 (12.7%)
Black	240	31 (12.9%)
Asian	205	21 (10.2%)
Other	212	31 (14.6%)

Demographic Characteristic of those Reporting Suicidal Behaviors and/or Ideation

Gender	Considered Suicide (n=3954)*	Attempted Suicide (n=3724)*	Attempt Resulted in Injury (n=3716)*
Female	585 (29.9%)	235 (12.6%)	80 (4.3%)
Male	348 (17.4%)	117 (6.3%)	56 (3.0%)
Total	933 (23.6%)	352 (9.5%)	136 (3.7%)

* Number of valid cases for question

Demographic Characteristic of those Reporting Suicidal Behaviors and/or Ideation

Race/Ethnicity	Considered Suicide (n=3934)*	Attempted Suicide (n=3706)*	Attempt Resulted in Injury (n=3698)*
White	693 (23.5%)	249 (8.9%)	94 (3.4%)
Hispanic/ Latino	53 (17.4%)	32 (11.6%)	11 (4.0%)
Black	58 (23.4%)	21 (9.3%)	8 (3.5%)
Asian	46 (21.4%)	24 (12.2%)	12 (6.2%)
Other	78 (35.8%)	26 (13.0%)	12 (6.0%)

* Number of valid cases for question

Association of Sexual Assault and Suicidal Behavior and/or Ideation

Suicidal Behavior and/or Ideation	Yes Sexual Assault	No Sexual Assault	P-value
Considered Suicide	25.0%	72.8%	<.01
Attempted Suicide	34.6%	65.4%	<.01
Attempt Resulted in Injury	41.2%	58.8%	<.01

Prevalence of Suicidal Behaviors and/or Ideation among Students who Report History of Sexual Assault by Gender

	Considered Suicide (n=454)*	Attempted Suicide (n=419)*	Attempt Resulted in Injury (n=418)*
Female	52.6%	27.9%	12.0%
Male	47.2%	27.9%	15.5%
P-value	ns	ns	ns

* Number of valid cases for question

Prevalence of Adolescent Sexual Assault among Students who Reported Suicide Behavior and/or Ideation by Gender

Suicidal Behaviors/ Ideation		Total Sample	Yes Sexual Assault	P - value
Considered Suicide	Female	577	30.2%	<.01
	Male	335	17.3%	
Attempted Suicide	Female	230	37.4%	.07
	Male	108	28.7%	
Attempt Resulted in Injury	Female	79	46.8%	.08
	Male	52	32.7%	

Summary Findings

(Study Population)

- Females more likely than males to report unwanted sexual contact
- Females more likely than males to report suicidal behaviors and ideation
- Strong relationship between reporting unwanted sexual contact and suicidal behavior and ideation

Summary Findings

(Sexual Assault Gender Difference)

- No significant difference in proportion of males and females who reported suicidal behavior and/or ideation based on reported unwanted sexual contact.
e.g. this relationship did not differ by gender.

Summary Findings

(Suicidal Behavioral Gender Difference)

- However, among those who reported suicidal behavior or ideation a larger proportion of females reported unwanted sexual contact than males, e.g. this relationship did differ by gender.

Conclusion/Recommendations

- Practitioners in both areas should be aware of the high prevalence of the other condition among their target populations
- Those working with sexual assault victims need to be aware of the high proportion of both males and females that may be suicidal and need training re: appropriate interventions.
- Those working with suicidal youth need to be aware of high proportion of target group that may be survivors of sexual assault, especially among females, and how to appropriately address.

Limitations

- Representativeness
 - Massachusetts only
 - Public schools only
 - Data not weighted
- Can not determine cause and effect

Considerations

- May or may not be differences in gender or race in disclosure of either issue and/or understanding of questions
- 30% of those responding “yes” to being sexually hurt in context of teen dating violence did not identify as ever having experienced sexual contact against will